





folk-lore.

# A Hertfordshire Robin Hood or the Story of Jack o' Legs the Robber-Giant of Weston

By

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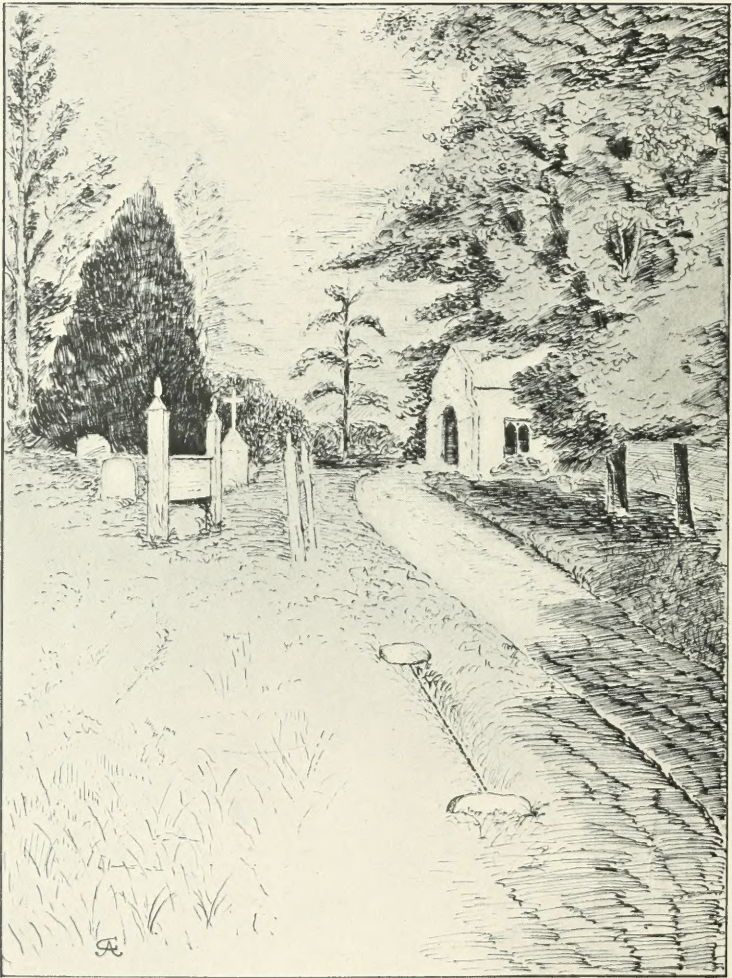
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Jack o' Legs' Grave in Weston Churchyard.  
(From a sketch by G. Aylott.)

# A HERTFORDSHIRE ROBIN HOOD, OR THE STORY OF JACK O' LEGS, THE ROBBER-GIANT OF WESTON.

BY W. B. GERISH.

**O**UTLAW stories, such as Hereward the Wake, Robin Hood, and others, have always been extremely popular among the peasantry of England. This hero-worship survives to-day in the lenient, not to say favourable, eye with which the poacher's exploits are regarded. In many Hertfordshire villages the punishments he has undergone for offences against the Game Laws are not looked upon as being any disgrace, and he is generally far more popular than the gamekeeper or the squire. It is the characteristic admiration for the skill and knowledge of the individual outlaw pitted against a superior force.

This natural partiality finds expression in our county in the legend of a local outlaw or brigand, one Jack o' Legs, who lived in a wood at Weston, levying toll on the passengers who passed along the Great North Road. The story of his exploits, how he measured out rough justice and befriended the poor, was captured and executed, is widely known: from Buntingford to Hitchin most of the persons one meets can supply the inquirer with a more or less garbled account of the Weston giant. The main incidents are usually the same, but the details are somewhat varied.

In common with all folk-tales, a very high antiquity has been assigned to these robber-outlaw stories. They may be Celtic, Saxon, or Medieval, but the prevailing belief is that the events narrated took place shortly after the Conquest, and represent Saxon rebellion against the Norman yoke. In my story of "A Hertfordshire St. George"<sup>1</sup> this opinion is dealt with, and Salmon's<sup>2</sup> views quoted at length.

Ballads on such hero-tales as those alluded to have been in existence ever since the invention of printing, and it would not be surprising to discover that the story of Jack o' Legs had been immortalized in this way. As a matter of fact, quite recently it has been rendered into verse by a local resident.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Home Counties Magazine," vol. iv., 1902, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup> Salmon's "History of Hertfordshire," 1728, under "Brent Pelham."

<sup>3</sup> "The Hermit of Olde Baldok" (Paternoster's "Monthly Advertiser," June, 1903). The hero is described as a leprous Templar, who retired to the



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I will give the various accounts of the tradition as set forth in the County Histories, also a brief reference in a local handbook, and a picturesque account in one of the most recent works dealing with rambles in Hertfordshire.

Chauncy (1700)<sup>1</sup> does not refer to it, but as a lawyer he naturally disdained such intangible stories.

Salmon (1728) gives the following account:<sup>2</sup>

“In the churchyard are two Stones, or rather Stumps of Stones at about fourteen Foot asunder, which the Swains will have to be on the Grave of a Giant. It is not improbable that they belonged to two several Graves, to the Head or Feet of both. About 70 years ago a very long Thigh-bone was taken out of the Church chest, where it had lain many years for a Shew, and sold by the Clerk to John Trediskin, who, we are told, put it amongst the rarities of Oxford.

“This Giant, called Jack o’ Legs, as Fame goes, lived in a wood here, was a great Robber, but a generous one, for he plundered the Rich to feed the Poor. He took bread from the Baldock Bakers frequently, who taking him at an advantage, put out his Eyes and after hanged him upon a Knoll in Baldock Field. He made them at his Exit but one single Request, which they granted: that he might have his Bow put into his Hand, and wherever his Arrow fell he should be buried, which happened to be in Weston churchyard.

“To follow such a story is almost as wise as to confute it. Yet considering how prettily these Relations are brought into the World, and how carefully nursed up to gigantick Prodigies, one may believe the Pedigree of this to be from the famed Richard Strongbow, whose feats had been told by Nursery Fires, till they were thus happily improved.”

Clutterbuck (1815) says:<sup>3</sup>

“Richard Strongbow . . . was a man of great prowess and valour. The idle story which is at this day repeated by the credulous of this village, that there lived here in former times, a bowman of gigantic strength and stature called Jack o’ Legs, the

cave, lived a hermit’s life, died, and was buried in Weston churchyard. There appears to be no historical foundation for this, it is purely a fanciful story set forth in rhyme.

<sup>1</sup> Chauncy’s “History of Hertfordshire.”

<sup>2</sup> Salmon’s “History of Hertfordshire,” p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> Clutterbuck’s “Herts,” vol. ii., p. 505, footnote.



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remains of whose cave is supposed to exist in some detached fragments of brick-work in a field between this village and Baldock, probably took its rise from the martial prowess of this Earl."

Cussans (1870-73), referring to the fact that "during the reign of Stephen this church, together with the Manor of Baldock, was given by Gilbert Strongbow, Earl of Strigul, to the Knights Templars," in a footnote<sup>1</sup> says:

"A hazy tradition respecting this famous archer and his foundation of the church still lingers in the neighbourhood. The story runs that during that indefinite period known as 'once upon a time,' a man of extraordinary size and strength lived in this vicinity, and as the custom of giants in those days was, he supported himself by levying forced contributions upon travellers and his wealthy neighbours. But, bad as this marauder was, there was one redeeming point in his character—though he robbed the rich, he was a liberal benefactor to the poor. The bakers of Baldock, taking advantage of a time of scarcity, charged such an exorbitant price for their bread that the poor were unable to buy. The giant—he seems to have possessed no other name—attempted to destroy the monopoly by the simple expedient of taking the bread and distributing it among the starving people, but he was frustrated in his charitable design, in the execution of which he was taken prisoner. His eyes were put out with a baker's peel preparatory to his death; but just before the fatal stroke he begged that he might be allowed to have his favourite bow, which no other man could bend, requesting those who had been the recipients of his bounty to build a chapel, for the benefit of his soul, on the spot where the arrow should alight. The request was granted; the mighty archer bent his bow, and the arrow, speeding four miles through the air, at length fell on the site of Weston Church. So runs the tale, and should anyone question its authenticity, the villagers point triumphantly to the church itself as evidence, and clinch the arguments in the words of Smith the Weaver, when asserting the royal descent of Jack Cade, 'The bricks are alive at this day to testify it: therefore, deny it not.'"

There is a reference to the tradition in "A Handbook to Hitchin and Neighbourhood," by C. Bishop, 1870, p. 65:

"On the Great North Road, near the village of Graveley, is a considerable elevation which goes by the name of 'Jack's Hill,'"

<sup>1</sup> Cussans' "History of Hertfordshire: Hundred of Broadwater," p. 47.

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from its having been the scene of depredations on travellers by a noted highwayman called 'Jack o' Legs.' Tradition speaks of him as a man of very tall stature, who, when he walked through the street of Baldock, could look into the upstairs windows; his principal abode was a cave in the parish of Weston. When he found his end approaching he (like Robin Hood) called for his bow that he might shoot an arrow to mark the spot where he wished to be buried. The arrow glanced on the roof of the chancel, and from thence fell to the ground near the gate of the churchyard, where two small stones about twelve feet apart still denote the head and foot of the grave of this once celebrated character.

"It may be worthy of note that there is still a family named Legs residing in that neighbourhood."

Mr. H. W. Tompkins, in "Highways and Byeways of Hertfordshire" (1902), gives the most recent local narrative of the village hero's life and adventures. He says (pp. 232-6 and 258-9):

"Once upon a time a giant, a mighty man of valour, lived in a cave near the village of Weston. He was so tall that when he stalked through the streets of Baldock, as he often did, he would sometimes pause to chat with his friends through the first-floor windows, leaning his arms upon the sill. He was a man of civil speech, a good-tempered fellow so long as he got his own way, and he had many friends. But he held questionable opinions touching the sacredness of property, and always took by force such things as he required; so it came to pass at length that he had many enemies also. Sometimes he would walk out to a spot near the little village of Graveley, and there wait for wealthy passers, whom he would despoil of their money or their goods. The men of Graveley call that spot 'Jack's Hill' unto this day, because their fathers had in olden time called this tall, bold robber 'Jack o' Legs,' but by other men he was called the 'Weston Giant.' He was so clever with his bow that he could stand at the mouth of his cave and send an arrow through a rook as it sat upon a tree-top half a mile away; and so strong was the bow this giant carried that he could shoot an arrow more than three miles from the place where he stood. For more years than I can tell Jack o' Legs was feared by all strange men and wayfarers who had occasion to pass near his cave or along the road where he watched, for so great was his fame that men heard of his deeds long before they drew near to the place where he was. But there came a day when the grievous wrongs done by this robber could no longer be borne; so some men of Baldock lay in wait secretly, and in great numbers, to capture him, for they knew that only by reason

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of their numbers could they prevail over so strong a giant. Now Jack o' Legs knew not that men sought to compass his death, so one day, very early in the morning, he came down by the road that leads from Weston to Baldock, as he had so often done before. And as he walked between the trees that stood on either side of the street, as they stand now, he at first espied no man, for it had been noised in the town the night before that Jack o' Legs was to be caught, and all those men and women who most feared the giant were mindful to keep indoors until they knew that he was killed or bound fast. But the other men hid themselves in the churchyard. Now the giant walked past the church as though he had a mind to go to Radwell, and knew not that the men lay in wait for him so closely. So after he had gone a few steps they ran from the churchyard as quietly as they could and came behind him, and one who was taller than the rest smote him with a great stick upon the back of the neck so that he fell upon his face as though he were dead. Then they bound his arms and his legs with cords, and when he came to himself they told him to prepare for his death. Then Jack o' Legs said, 'Let me shoot one arrow from my bow, and where the arrow falls there bury my body when I am dead.' So they let him shoot. And no man among them had ever known an arrow shot to so great a distance; for the arrow from the giant's bow soared high over the fields until it struck the tower of Weston Church and fell to the ground. And when they had slain the giant, like good men and true they remembered their word and digged his grave full twelve feet long at the spot where the arrow had fallen. And although the grave was so long, they had to double the body before they could get it into its resting-place, so great was the stature of the robber, who had lived in the cave at no great distance from the church. This is a true story; and if any man cares to see the grave of Jack o' Legs he may find it in Weston churchyard, near the gate, with a stone to mark his head and another to mark his feet, four yards apart.

"I have told the story of the Weston giant as it was told to me, and as readers would learn it were they to put together the several versions which are current in the county. I need hardly point out how closely some of its incidents remind us of the story of Robin Hood; it seems indeed to resemble that classic fable in some such fashion as the story of Hasisadra's adventure resembles the Biblical account of Noah's flood. It is, I think, the most romantic legend in Hertfordshire, and I cannot blame myself for finding it uppermost in my mind as I stand in the churchyard at Baldock 'early in the morning,' as those men are said to have done when waiting for Jack o' Legs. . . . .



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“I have but one object in visiting this spot (Weston churchyard), and that is to find the grave of Jack o’ Legs. A boy who is standing near the gate grins from ear to ear as I broach the subject of the local hero, and leads me to the place. Here, sure enough, almost hidden among the grass, are the two stones to which I referred at the beginning of my last chapter, about twelve feet apart. ‘They ’ud be most three times as far apart, only w’en the’ was puttin’ ’em down they ’af to double ’im twice afore ’e ’ud go in. It was ’ere as the arrer fell, cos it ’it the church first and then came off this way.’ Here, at least, is one who is unwavering in his belief of the wonderful story of the life and death of Jack o’ Legs, and who, if the adventures of Ulysses were set before him in simple prose, would probably regard them as of inferior merit.

“I can but think it an odd coincidence that near the reputed grave of one who was a mighty man of valour with the bow there should be a record in the church porch stating that the patronage of Weston Church was given to the Knights Templars by Gilbert Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke, who died in 1148.”

I think at the outset we may dismiss the Strongbow origin of the story as improbable. Gilbert Strongbow, Earl of Clare and Pembroke, possessed this manor in common with many others, and the “mighty archer” feature of the Robin Hood type of folk-stories is by no means uncommon. I do not learn that his prowess with the bow gave rise to any similar legend elsewhere. Nor is it in this particular instance so improbable as it seems. If we do not place too much reliance upon the description of the place where he was captured (which must, I think, have been before leaving the wood, as there was little cover elsewhere for his assailants), the distance from the spot to the church may not have exceeded half a mile,<sup>1</sup> and I understand a powerful Bowman armed with a cross-bow could send a shaft that distance. I think we may assume that it was a special effort, a Sampson-like achievement, the shaft not being shot at a venture, but in the direction of Weston Church. In the Middle Ages great value was attached to burial in consecrated ground, and this fact must not be overlooked in dealing with the tale, as it proves that Jack could not have been a mere common robber and freebooter, under the Church’s ban, or he would not have been permitted burial in the churchyard, but have been interred at the gallows’ foot.

Mr. Marlborough Pryor, of Weston Park, possesses an extremely

<sup>1</sup> The distance from the cave to the church is about one and a quarter mile; the former lies due west of the latter.

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interesting map of Weston, dated 1620, showing the parish as it was before enclosure. On it Jack's cave is represented standing in the middle of a wood; this seems to have been destroyed some time before 1700, as in 1725 it was all cultivated land. The cave was an excavation in the chalk, and stood in a field of twenty-nine acres, still called "The Cave." It was in existence up to about 1849, and is said to have closely resembled that at Royston, save that it lacked any ornamentation.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Richardson, the then tenant, filled it up and levelled the ground; since that time, constant ploughing and harrowing have almost obliterated the site.

I am inclined to think that the cave or pit was never used as a residence; it was probably originally a dene-hole cut for the purpose of obtaining chalk many centuries ago, and may have been utilized as a larder or storehouse by the redoubtable Jack. In one of the Robin Hood stories we are informed that he adopted a similar hiding-place for venison.

Jack's grave is situated about ten yards from the south porch of Weston Church, on the left-hand side of the path, close to the churchyard gate. It is marked by two small stones, now nearly buried in the turf, and a well-defined indentation occupies the place of the usual mound between them.<sup>2</sup> This has existed from time immemorial, but it is doubtless re-cut from time to time.<sup>3</sup> The distance between the stones is exactly 14 feet  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches. Having received permission to examine the stones, I had them carefully taken up, cleaned, and, after taking measurements, replaced. That at the head is  $10\frac{3}{8}$  inches long,  $9\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide, and  $3\frac{1}{4}$  inches thick. The upper edge is much weather-worn, the corners are rounded off, and on the side next the ground is an incised cross *potent*—



The stone at the foot appears to be part of a dripstone, being moulded on the under side. Its extreme length is 12 inches, width  $10\frac{3}{4}$  inches, and it is 4 inches thick.

<sup>1</sup> I regret to say that I have not been able to obtain its dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> See illustration.

<sup>3</sup> I have heard that the Evil One is supposed to renew it, but this belief is not general. In Penrith churchyard is the grave of Sir Hugh Cæsarius, who spent his time killing wild boars in Inglewood Forest. The distance between the head and the foot pillars of his grave is fourteen feet.

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Mr. W. E. Farr informed me that the grave was opened by the then rector many years ago, but only bones which had belonged to persons of ordinary stature were found.

Referring to Salmon's account, I may say that the thigh-bone reputed to be Jack o' Legs' does not figure in the catalogue of Tradescant's Museum, nor, upon inquiry, is it to be found in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford. The reference to the Baldock bakers in Salmon and others is curious. I find in the County Records, under date September, 1795, accounts of serious rioting at Baldock by reason of the bakers<sup>1</sup> having formed a ring to put up the price of bread. Riots may have taken place elsewhere in the county, but they are not recorded. The strict legal enactments governing the price of this necessary of life in times past, and the general dishonesty of the bakers, who adulterated, gave short weight, and constantly increased the price when there was the slightest indication of scarcity, made these tradesmen always unpopular. The stand which this village Hampden took in seeking to remedy the attempt at extortion when justice was not otherwise to be obtained, may account in a great measure for the high esteem in which he was, and still continues to be, held.

Clutterbuck refers to brick-work as existing in his time on the site of the cave. If so, it was demolished at the time the cave was filled in, but no one now living remembers its existence.

Mr. Bishop's reference to a family of Legge living in the immediate vicinity is extremely interesting, especially if we could trace their descent from our hero.<sup>2</sup> The apparent origin of the name would seem to be from his abnormal height.

In conclusion, one can only say of this hero-tale, like all others, that it is most difficult to say what is fact and what romance. I think we may reasonably conclude that the main incidents as given by the historians are fairly correct, embellished although they doubtless are by additions which have become attached to it in the course of being handed down from father to son for many generations.<sup>3</sup>

Briefly the tale may be summarized: outlaw of unusual stature; relieved wealthy travellers; dispensed even-handed justice in district; captured by enemies through stratagem; indicated burial-

<sup>1</sup> The miller, if we may judge from the proverbs, was equally fraudulent in his dealings.

<sup>2</sup> Bardsley, in his "Dictionary of Surnames," suggests that Legg was perhaps a nickname or abbreviation of Legard, who, according to Lower, was "Le garde" or "keeper."

<sup>3</sup> The process of embellishment still continues, only in place of marvellous achievements we adorn *our* heroes with the fictitious authorship of epigrams, anecdotes, and stories.



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place by arrow-shot; executed; for ever venerated by peasantry. The later additions are: gigantic stature; improbable extent of arrow's flight; cave dwelling.

I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. G. Aylott for the sketch of Jack's grave which accompanies this paper, and to Mr. Marlborough Pryor, Mr. W. E. Farr, and Mr. A. H. Bradbeer for their information.











